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POLICY ISSUES: COORDINATION AND COOPERATION WITHIN AND OUTSIDE THE UNITED NATIONS, INCLUDING NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

System-wide strategy in the field of the environment

Note by the Executive Director

Summary

The draft system-wide strategy in the field of the environment, which is presented to the Governing Council of UNEP at its nineteenth session in the form of an information paper UNEP/GC.19/INF.11 is intended to provide a first draft for the consideration of the Council and to elicit its views on the further development of a strategic system-wide approach to the environmental challenges that were identified by the Council at its eighteenth session, namely, the sustainable management and use of natural resources; sustainable production and consumption; a better environment for human health and well-being; globalization trends and the environment and the important area of environmental information and assessment. Programmatic thrusts developed in each programme area are designed to meet the broad environmental objectives identified in the draft strategy. The strategy should, with respect to the organization of the United Nations system, provide both a tool for coordination in the area of environment and a common basis for future system-wide policy and programme development. The strategy also attempts to identify emerging environmental issues and trends, and this attempt should evolve into a proactive approach designed to assist in the identification of a future programmatic focus.

Suggested action by the Governing Council

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In view of the forthcoming special session of the General Assembly for the review of the implementation of Agenda 21 (June 1997), it is anticipated that there may be significant changes that would have to be reflected in the strategy. In addition, the further procedure of consulting the organizations of the United Nations system that will have to take place for the purpose of finalizing the strategy would also have to take that into account. Consequently, the document is presented to the Council as an information paper and the Governing Council may wish to endorse the general direction outlined in this note as well as the document, and to request its further development and refinement in consultation with all relevant organizations of the United Nations system following the conclusion of the special session of the General Assembly. The Governing Council may also wish to request the Executive Director of UNEP to update the document periodically in consultation with the organizations of the United Nations system and to ensure its availability to member countries and all concerned international organizations, utilizing, inter alia, modern communication methods, including electronic mail. The finalized version of the strategy could be formally endorsed by the Governing Council at its next session.

I. BACKGROUND

1. Following its review of the mid-term evaluation of the system-wide medium-term environment programme (SWMTEP), the Governing Council of UNEP, at its last session, endorsed the assessment of the Executive Director that there was a need for a strategy document in the field of the environment and that a draft document should be submitted to the Council in 1997 to become operational in 1998 (Governing Council decision 18/13). This document would provide the Governing Council with an important tool to assist in the discharge of its responsibility to promote international cooperation in the field of the environment, to recommend policies to that end, and to provide policy guidance for the direction and coordination of environmental programmes in the United Nations system, as established by the General Assembly of the United Nations (resolution 2997 (XXVII)) and reaffirmed in Agenda 21 (chapter 38).

2. The UNEP Inter-Agency Environment Coordination Group (IAEG) discussed the outline of the strategy prepared by UNEP at its consecutive meetings and agreed that the document should be of a strategic rather than a planning nature and should ensure complementarity of action while avoiding duplication. Thus, the objective of the document is to determine the strategic joint goals which should be achieved by the system in the area of the environment. The current draft, however, takes a broad and inclusive approach to identifying major programmatic thrusts and will have to be subject to further refinement through consultations within the United Nations system before it can be considered to define an authoritative strategy.

3. In consultations undertaken with the organizations of the United Nations System, through IAEG, an aspect that was stressed was that the strategy, once finalized, could also provide a clear framework for future collaboration between UNEP and its partner organizations in the system. It was also stressed that the strategy should not be seen as a rigid structure, but should allow of regular updating and strengthening in the light of ongoing developments. In that respect, it could also be an informative and

useful "living" document that would retain its relevance over the medium term.

4. While the strategy adopts a very comprehensive approach as regards the environmental issues that are addressed, it is not intended to duplicate Agenda 21 in terms of the sustainable development approach. It is intended to be a means of building further on the provisions of Agenda 21 in their environmental dimension and to assist in the development of a strategic orientation and a coherent system-wide response to them and to other intergovernmental decisions and action plans, including those of the Governing Council of UNEP, the General Assembly, the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), the governing bodies of the specialized agencies and United Nations organizations and the outcomes of major conferences.

5. The United Nations system-wide strategy is intended to provide eventually a comprehensive system-wide response to the identified environmental challenges, while emphasizing the institutional and organizational arrangements already in place in various parts of the United Nations system. These would include, in particular, the existing structure of task managers established by the Inter-Agency Committee for Sustainable Development (IACSD), and subsequently endorsed by the CSD, as well as joint formal and informal collaborative arrangements that have been established in various programme areas. IACSD, as the standing subsidiary body of the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC), has established the system of task managers to take the lead in inter-agency coordination in the various programme areas of Agenda 21 and to fulfil requirements of reporting to CSD. Relevant task managers of the United Nations system are referred to in the draft strategy document in each programme area. UNEP has been designated as Task Manager in the following areas:

(a) Chapter 9 - Protection of the atmosphere - jointly with WMO;

(b) Chapter 12 - Combating desertification and drought;

(c) Chapter 15 - Biological diversity;

(d) Chapter 19 - Toxic chemicals;

(e) Chapter 20 - Hazardous waste; and

(f) Chapter 40 - UNEP is joint Task Manager as far as the system-wide Earthwatch is concerned, with the United Nations Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development.

6. The further development and refinement of the strategy will be undertaken through inter-agency consultations, and in particular, will take account of the outcome of the special session of the General Assembly in June 1997, which is expected to have implications for the future programmes of work of various United Nations organizations and entities and will thus have a direct bearing on the strategy itself. In addition, this further refinement could include prioritization of the programme thrusts, if so required by the Governing Council of UNEP. The deliberations of the Council

on policy matters will be taken into account, as well as the outcome of the special session of the General Assembly.

II. STRUCTURE OF THE DOCUMENT

7. At its eighteenth session, the Governing Council of UNEP adopted the UNEP programme of work for the biennium 1996-1997. The following areas were identified as major environmental challenges:

(a) Sustainable management and use of natural resources;

(b) Sustainable production and consumption;

(c) A better environment for human health and well-being; and

(d) Globalization trends and the environment.

8. The document will inform future UNEP cooperation with the organizations of the United Nations system and, as agreed with partners in that system, is based on the identification of objectives and the programmatic thrusts required to meet them, while addressing the above-mentioned environmental challenges identified by the Governing Council of UNEP. In addition, a chapter on environmental information and assessment has been added, emphasizing the role of the United Nations system in that area.

9. Broad programmatic thrusts in each programme area, designed to meet the objectives identified and which require system-wide collaboration, are grouped under the following headings and correspond to the priority areas of action for UNEP identified in Agenda 21:

(a) Assessment (environmental monitoring dissemination of information and scientific research);

(b) Policy (promoting international cooperation; developing international law; promoting regional cooperation and raising public awareness); and

(c) Management (facilitating transfer of environmentally sound technologies and providing technical, legal and institutional advice to the various countries).

10. The strategy also aims at identifying emerging environmental issues and trends, which will gain importance in the near future thus calling for concerted international action.

A. Sustainable management and use of natural resources

11. Rapid population growth, unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, the expansion of agriculture and uncontrolled urbanization have led to intensified and unsustainable pressures on land, water and biological and atmospheric resources. The pollution and mismanagement of natural resources, especially in the most vulnerable ecological areas, are eroding the ecosystems that uphold human life. Caring for natural resources and

promoting their sustainable use by the international community are essential to ensure the survival and the well-being of the Earth.

12. The sustainable management and use of natural resources are dealt with in the following chapters of Agenda 21: chapter 9 (Protection of the atmosphere), chapter 10 (Integrated approach to the planning and management of land resources), chapter 11 (Combating deforestation), chapter 12 (Managing fragile ecosystems: combating desertification and drought), chapter 13 (Managing fragile ecosystems: sustainable mountain development), chapter 14 (Promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development), chapter 15 (Conservation of biological diversity), chapter 16 (Environmentally sound management of biotechnology), chapter 17 (Protection of the oceans, all kinds of seas, including enclosed and semi-enclosed seas, and coastal areas and the protection, rational use and development of their living resources) and chapter 18 (Protection of the quality and supply of freshwater resources: application of integrated approaches to the development, management and use of water resources).

B. Sustainable production and consumption patterns

13. Widespread and unsustainable patterns of consumption and production continue to degrade the global environment. The utilization of inappropriate technologies results in high waste yields, depletion of non-renewable resources and a wasteful use of energy. Unsustainable consumption patterns and lifestyles, particularly in the richest societies, combined with population growth place additional pressures on the carrying capacity of the Earth. Countries must attempt to establish an improved rationality in their consumption patterns and to move towards the adoption of cleaner production methods, utilizing low-waste and energy-efficient technologies.

14. Aspects of sustainable consumption and production patterns are identified in chapter 4 (Changing consumption patterns) of Agenda 21. Other chapters of Agenda 21, in particular chapter 9 (Protection of the atmosphere) and its programme area on energy development, are also of relevant in this respect.

C. A better environment for human health and well-being

15. Rapid industrialization and urbanization result in the increasing prevalence of hazardous chemicals, toxic wastes and other pollutants in the environment, thus increasing the risks of water-borne and other diseases of environmental origin. Health-related risks have adverse effects on economic productivity and social welfare, including exacerbation of the adverse effects of natural disasters on the poor. The relationship between environmental degradation and pollution and human health and well-being must be better understood and preventive measures strengthened to mitigate negative environmental and social impacts.

16. The following chapters of Agenda 21 deal directly with this environmental challenge: chapter 5 (Demographic dynamics and sustainability), chapter 6 (Protecting the promoting human health), chapter 19 (Environmentally sound management of toxic chemicals, including the prevention of illegal international traffic in toxic and dangerous products), chapter 20 (Environmentally sound management of hazardous wastes,

including the prevention of illegal international traffic in hazardous wastes), chapter 21 (Environmentally sound management of solid wastes and sewage-related issues) and chapter 22 (Safe and environmentally sound management of radioactive wastes).

D. Environmental information and assessment

17. The availability and quality of environmental data are indispensable for assessing global trends in the area of the environment and supporting policy recommendations and decision-making at all levels. Assessment and information must be based on scientifically reliable data, and strengthening the United Nations capacity to collect such information is of crucial importance. Early warning of emerging environmental risks would further enhance the capacity of the international community to take preventive action.

18. The relevant chapters of Agenda 21 are: chapter 2 (International cooperation to accelerate sustainable development in developing countries and related domestic policies), chapter 36 (Promoting education, public awareness and training) and chapter 39 (International legal instruments and mechanisms).

E. Globalization trends and the environment

19. The globalization of the world economy, including the liberalization of trade, coupled with the absence and uneven application of norms and standards, have exacerbated burdens on the global environment. International and multidisciplinary approaches to understanding the relationship between trade and economic policies and the environment should underpin strategies to establish international and regional accords and policies to respond to global environmental challenges.

20. The relevant chapters of Agenda 21, namely chapter 2 on international cooperation and related domestic policies and chapter 39 on international legal instruments and mechanism, are of particular relevance to that challenge.

III. CONCLUSION

21. The draft strategy document, presented to the Governing Council in the form of an information document (UNEP/GC.19.INF.11), constitutes the starting point for the development of a strategic approach outlining the broad objectives and actions to be taken by the United Nations system in the coming five years. It also indicates the involvement of specific United Nations organizations in the identified programme areas as well as the task managers designated by IACSD in those areas. It is intended that the strategy document will provide not only a general reference to what the United Nations system response to a given environmental challenge will be but also a common basis for future planning and programming in the field of the environment.